

The history of moral philosophy since the 17th century

[Philosophy](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

1) 'The history of moral philosophy since the 17th century recapitulates the ancient debate between Stoics and Epicureans.' Explain this view, giving the basic ideas of Stoicism and Epicureanism. Which philosophers in modern times (that is, since the time of Montaigne going forward) might it be seen as especially applying to? Has the debate been won by one side or the other? Explain.

The debate between Stoicism and Epicureanism, it could be argued, started around two millennia ago. Though parallels can be observed between Stoicism and Buddhism, hence one cannot draw a clear line to the beginning of this great debate. It could also be argued that this debate has continued along the millennia and even beyond the European age of enlightenment. Certainly, numerous philosophers have been influenced by the 'ancient' philosophies of Stoicism and Epicureanism.

Epicureanism is the pursuit of pleasure as an ethical principle. Pleasure is the goal of living. To derive the most pleasure possible in one's lifetime being the chief aim. It was originally a challenge to Platonism, though it later became the main opponent of Stoicism.

Stoicism is an indifference to pain and pleasure. Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher believed that the ideal state is one in which you're never disturbed. Stoics believe that in order to be free from emotional disturbances you have to realise that the only things you have a choice in is your personal behaviour and attitude, all else belongs to fate.

John Bramhall labelled Hobbes a Stoic for his determinism, and Hobbes did not reject the label. One thing Hobbes disagreed with the Stoics on was that <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-moral-philosophy-since-the-17th-century/>

moral was based on right reason. This was also one thing on which he agreed with the anti-Stoic, David Hume. The two never debated with one another directly, but their philosophies are contrasting and could perhaps be likened to a post-renaissance debate between the Stoics and Epicureans. Though Hume has never been labelled an Epicurean, his criticism of the Stoic philosophy could justify such a labelling, alongside his theory of justice which can be considered utilitarian.

A post-renaissance Stoic and Epicurean debate could perhaps be better exemplified by the clashing philosophies of Mill and Kant. John Mill was the pioneer of Utilitarianism, which retains the Epicurean view that humans naturally seek pleasure and avoid pain. The utilitarianism of John Mill can sometimes be classified as a form of Hedonism, that is, it judges the moral good of actions by their consequential contribution to the greater happiness of all. The figurehead of contrast, Kant, recognised in the Stoics a school he could not but sympathise with. But he criticises the Stoics for neglecting happiness altogether.

He thought that while happiness cannot be the school of virtue, it ought to be its accompaniment and result. According to Stoics, our will is in our control, but not its outcome. A good person is defined by his motive, not his action. Kant's philosophy of the good will and doing good because it is our duty is somewhat reminiscent of the aforementioned Stoic belief. Mill, on the other hand, holds the consequential view of moral philosophy. An act, he believes, can be categorised as morally good if it produces pleasure. Overlooking the consequences of morality, thought Mill, was Kant's failure.

Like all debates in philosophy, no side can ever claim to have won a definitive victory. Take the example presented in Plato's 'Gorgias' in which Socrates achieves victory over the amoralist Callicles. Although Callicles succumbed, amoralism still arose around two thousand years later in the form of Nietzsche. Thus to claim that Epicureanism has claimed victory over Stoicism or vice versa is impermissible. Instead, we can say that, in the case of amoralism and egoism at least, that majority opinion rules against it.

If we were to apply this to the case of the Epicurean and Stoic debate, I'd argue that Epicureanism has prevailed. Certainly, the Utilitarian idea of 'the greatest good for the greatest number' is a more commonly shared belief than Kant's philosophy of duty. The utilitarian idea, for example, can be observed through Western democracy, where the government is controlled by the majority. Thus at this moment in time, Epicureanism probably enjoys the upper hand, but the debate has not reached its conclusion, nor is it ever likely to.

2) Choose the moral philosopher whose ideas resonated the most with you this term from those on the reading list. Explain his or her main doctrines and how the philosopher arrived at them. Discuss as well the weaknesses and problems with his or her views. How has this reading changed the way you thought about morality?

Jean-Paul Sartre was a 20th century philosopher who stood for existentialism, that is, the belief that we are entirely free. He believed that one always has a choice in life as the obstacles we may face are created by our own consciousness and thus we also have the power to eliminate them.

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In 1933, Sartre studied under the world's leader in the field of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. His work influenced Sartre to write the 'Being and Nothingness' during the war when he had been placed in the meteorological unit. This placement had given him the free time to develop his doctrine that 'existence precedes essence'¹, thus rejecting the concept of human nature. Sartre emphasised that this is a wonderful concept because it ultimately means that we are free, even to choose our past.

During the war, Sartre was captured. His experience of imprisonment had pushed him to relate his ideas about the individual's freedom to society as a whole. He highlighted how 'freedom' is simply a meaningless word and thus people must be 'true' and 'authentic' to themselves in order to discover their own individuality.

After the Second World War, France saw a rise of atheism along with the growing frustration with beauracracy and science. This had allowed Sartre to both break away from the Christian philosophers of his century and align his doctrine with atheistic existentialism, which had stemmed from Nietzsche's conclusion that 'God is dead.'² Sartre's rejection of external values resulted in making the individual's choices even more significant by bestowing him or her with total responsibility for their choices. He concluded that the recognition of one's freedom therefore creates anguish: You are condemned to be free. ³

Sartre claimed that man is free 'from the moment he is thrown into this world.'⁴ It is, however, improbable that a young child has the complete capabilities to understand the nature of their actions; hence we have laws on

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the age of criminal responsibility. Crucially, Sartre's doctrine failed to mention when the capacity for responsibility develops.

Another criticism of Sartre would be that unlike Spinoza, he failed to register that man does not have full control over his own body. For instance, a person with a healthy lifestyle may develop terminal cancer, or they may inherit a congenital disorder that hinders their thought processes. Spinoza's belief was that the things that happen to us and the material world are an expression of nature, hence all the thoughts that we think also belong to nature. He believed that man is bound to the rules of nature as he is merely a part of something infinitely bigger.

Consequently, Spinoza maintained that you cannot conclude that the thoughts you construct are your own thoughts or whether it is nature simply constructing them for you. From this, it can be argued that man is not condemned to be free, rather he is an imprisoned soul condemned to be enslaved to a mechanical body. Although this argument may seem somewhat deterministic, Spinoza's views that people are bound to the rules of nature does highlight that Sartre's 'total freedom' may be an idealistic reflection of the true freedom we have.

I have found Sartre's philosophy inspirational. It is up to us to give meaning to life because life in itself is meaningless. His stance of complete freedom has allowed me to come to terms with my responsibility more as he has illustrated that my life is like a work of art with myself as its adopted artist. Sartre's philosophy implies that if we work hard enough, then our achievements can be boundless. All in all, this has encouraged me to remain

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ambitious, yet has also reminded me that I must persistently work hard in order to become successful, because the success of my future is solely in my own hands.